



ABIDING IN CHRIST,
ABOUNDING IN HOPE

JUNE/JULY 2006

SECTION B

VOICES & VISIONS

"FAR MORE THAN WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE"

Southeast Conference Annual Meeting Convenes June 8-10

For many of us, the Annual Meeting of the Conference is a time to reconnect with friends, give thanks for another year together, and participate in the shaping of our future. This year's meeting at First Congregational Christian United Church of Christ in Birmingham, Alabama, holds the promise of warm hospitality, rich worship, and joyous celebration.

Kicking off our time together will be the TAP (Theology Among the People) dinner and graduation ceremony on Thursday evening, June 8. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago will be the speaker. Friday morning's leadership convocation features Susan Mitchell and Joyce Hollyday presenting "On the Heels of Freedom:

Celebrating Our Stories," a time for being inspired by the stories of the American Missionary Association and our own. In the afternoon, Cameron Trimble will introduce the Conference's new website and online forum, and present

opportunities related to church vitality and leadership.

Dr. Wright will preach at Friday evening's worship service, and Revs. Mitchell and Hollyday will preach on Saturday morning. Hearings regarding resolutions, revision of the Conference by-laws, finances, and the impact of last year's General Synod will be followed by the annual business meeting. A "Kids Klub" will be convened for children, and our youth will be participating in an exciting program that includes a visit to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and lessons about civil disobedience for social change.

The theme for this year's Annual Meeting is drawn from the prayer that closes the third chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians: *I pray that...you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through*

*Far More Than We Can
Ask or Imagine...*

Southeast Conference
United Church of Christ

faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love...Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

Our Annual Meeting will be a time to celebrate and give thanks for God's faithfulness, for the ways we are being woven together in Christ's love, and for the blessings in our life that are indeed "far more than we could ask or imagine."

TAP MEMBERS TO GRADUATE AT ANNUAL MEETING



Among the Chattanooga TAP participants who will be celebrated at the graduation ceremony on June 8 are Pam Dent and Lesley Smith (Above left) and Vanessa Robb (Above right).



The Theology Among the People Banquet and Commencement honoring TAP graduates, participants, facilitators, and friends will take place on Thursday, June 8, at First Congregational Christian United Church of Christ in Birmingham, Alabama. The Commencement Ceremony, which is open to all, will take place at 7:30 p.m. and will feature Dr. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois, as the keynote speaker. Individuals from the Chattanooga and East Alabama TAP groups will celebrate the successful completion of three years of study in scripture, theology, and ministry. For more information about this event or to learn more about the TAP program, please contact Kathy Clark, Associate Conference Minister and Director of TAP, at the Conference Office or kclark@secucc.org.

"I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT UPON ALL . . .
AND YOUR YOUNG SHALL SEE VISIONS AND
YOUR OLD SHALL DREAM DREAMS. "

ACTS 2:17

INSIDE

THAILAND TRIP	2-3
THINKING THEOLOGICALLY	6
CONFERENCE CALENDAR	8

A Homecoming with Friends

Dear Friends,

In February, Southeast Conference staff members Gerri Ryons-Hudson, Kathy Clark, Susan Mitchell, Joyce Hollyday, and I, along with my sister Christina Dondero, took a three-week trip to Thailand. For me, it was a

FROM THE
CONFERENCE
MINISTER



“homecoming,” being in the places in which I spent my childhood as the son of Presbyterian missionaries, and with people who were a part of my upbringing. It was a delight to share this part of my life with colleagues who are an important part of my life and ministry today.

In the midst of a full itinerary, we had occasions to explore ways to

develop programs between colleagues in Thailand and the Southeast Conference, to enhance our inter-faith understanding and international Christian partnerships. We visited with the Moderator of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), bringing greetings from both the Southeast Conference and the United Church of Christ. The CCT, along with the United Church of Christ, is one of a number of “united and uniting” churches around the globe.

The Church of Christ in Thailand has 500 established congregations and 400 mission churches. Nineteenth-century Presbyterian missionaries introduced modern education and medicine to Thailand, and that work continues through renowned CCT-sponsored schools and hospitals across the kingdom. Many of the “united and uniting” churches were formed in the middle of the 20th century, an era of high ecumenical idealism. The CCT is comprised of historically Presbyterian, American Baptist, Disciples, and Christian and Missionary Alliance missions and congregations, and it was the church in which I was confirmed as a child. Because I was raised in a church in which denominational distinctions were less important than the ministries in which we were engaged together, I believe that it is no accident that I found my way into the United Church of Christ, into which I was ordained.

As with us in the United Church of Christ, the

Church of Christ in Thailand is dealing with issues of identity. Evangelical and

Pentecostal tides are rising, and the more traditional CCT congregations are exploring ways to engage these traditions while honoring their own ecumenical origins. But as in this country, often these other traditions have more sectarian impulses, and are not as inclined to hold Christian unity as foundational. One

colleague said to me when commenting on interfaith conversations, “Muslims and Buddhists may have differences from others of their faith, but they recognize the other as a part of the faith nonetheless. Christians often dismiss other Christians, so that in these conversations people of other faiths do not know who they are talking to when they talk to Christians.” This conversation reminded me of the importance of the particular vocation of “united and uniting” churches within the range of Christian traditions to name and to live out the call to be “one in Christ.”

In numerous conversations with students, church members, and church leaders, I was encouraged by the ways in which our Christian colleagues in Thailand are engaged with the world around them. This was a time of political turmoil in the kingdom, and I spoke to people who participated in demonstrations taking place while we were there, advocating for political

reform. We had excellent conversations about the state of human rights across Asia, the impact of globalization, and the role of the church in those movements. We saw the church engaged in peacemaking, confronting the sexual exploitation and prostitution of children, rebuilding areas devastated by the tsunami, sheltering refugees, fostering understanding with other faiths, providing support and healing to people with AIDS, and much more.

I was delighted to visit with another church wrestling with the types of



Tim with a Thai Elvis impersonator at the Aisa Hotel in Bangkok.



Tim and Kathy on an elephant at Lampang Reserve.

issues that engage us in the United States. I was reminded of the ways in which we are living in a world that is becoming closer and more interconnected. Each church and culture brings distinctive gifts that help us to see ourselves and others in a new light.

Peace,
Timothy C. Downs

VOICES & VISIONS

Voices & Visions, the Southeast Conference United Church of Christ section of the United Church News (USPS 764-070) is published four times a year. Its mission is to promote current events and conference news, offering information and inspiration to members. Views expressed in editorials, letters, and signed columns are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official Conference or UCC policies.

Southeast Conference United Church of Christ

1330 West Peachtree Street,
Suite #344
Atlanta, GA 30309

Phone: 404-607-1993
800-807-1993 (outside Atlanta)
Fax: 404-607-7939
www.secucc.org

Editor:
Joyce Hollyday
Contributing Editor:
Timothy C. Downs

Article ideas and submissions may be directed to the Editor at jhollyday@secucc.org, or call 800-442-1064.



Susan, Christina, Tim, Joyce, and Gerri at the Student Christian Center in Bangkok, which Tim and Christina's parents, Ray and Betty Downs, founded in 1950.

God Is Still Speaking in Thailand

By Susan Mitchell

Dialogue is more than talking...when the goal is peace and reconciliation. The Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture at Payap University is a place where this dialogue is taken seriously. God is still speaking in Thailand and can be heard throughout the Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture.

The Institute is located in the northern city of Chiang Mai and nestled on the small Crystal Spring campus. At the Institute, the dialogue is inter-religious—between Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims—and it is intra-religious. Each faith tradition seeks a better understanding of itself. At the Institute, students, professors, ministers, monks, and individuals from the community engage in dialogue to gain a better understanding of one another. Issues are addressed through individuals rather than systems. The theory is that people create and run systems and institutions. Change the behavior of the people, and the systems and institutions will change.



Joyce and Gerri on the night train to Chiang Mai.

This dialogue began in 1962 under the direction of Francis Seely and continued for more than a decade. Following a 15-year break, the dialogue resumed in 1990, and the current program was officially consecrated in 1996. Under the leadership of Mark Tamthai, the Institute's director, the program has five levels of mission utilizing a "theology of peacemaking and reconciliation." It engages dialogue with Payap University, through lectures to the student body and faculty discussion groups; with McGilvary Seminary, through its contextualization of Asian Theology; and with the Chiang Mai Community, through community and church discussion groups. It also sponsors a national Reconciliation Commission and a regional, Asian United Board for Christian Higher Education.

Everyone has an opportunity to engage in the dialogue through the Institute's ongoing programs: the Sinclair Thompson Lecture Series, which aims to increase Christians' understanding of Buddhism; the Francis Seely Faculty Seminar, which gathers scholars and religious leaders representing all of Thailand; classes on Buddhism and Christianity, which bring together Buddhist monks and Christian seminary students in dialogue; the Resident Scholars Program, which invites people conducting research relating to Thai or Southeast Asian religion and culture; and international study tours and conferences. Thailand's Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture stands as a sign of hope in our divided world.

Susan Mitchell is co-pastor of Sankofa United Church of Christ in Atlanta and was co-director of the Rekindle the Gift oral history and renewal ministry.



Susan with a Buddha robed for the new year.

Love for the "Least of These"

By Kathy Clark

Fifty-six kilometers west of Bangkok lies Nakhon Pathom, the oldest city in Thailand and home to the Pra Phatom Chedi, the largest monument to the Buddha in the country. Not far from the outer reaches of this ancient city is a unique and unlikely modern residence. Ban Kanjanapisek is home to 82 young men between the ages of 16 and 23 who have been convicted of crimes ranging from petty theft to murder, and who have been sentenced to live there as



Kathy with a merchant from the Hill Tribes, who are renowned for their artisanship.

an alternative to incarceration. An inviting, sprawling compound with a clean and modern school surrounded by cottages, recreation areas, and plenty of open, green space, Ban Kanjanapisek has no walls and no gates. Though there is nothing to stop them, no one has ever "escaped" from this compound.

Ban Kanjanapisek exists because of the vision of its director, Ms. Ticha na Nakorn, who led us on a tour of this extraordinary facility. Here the young men learn life skills and receive academic and vocational training. But most of all, they learn to love themselves and to respect others. The vision of the program states clearly and prominently that Ban Kanjanapisek is not a prison, its residents are not prisoners, and its staff members are not prison wardens. Ban Kanjanapisek is "a HOME, a temporary substitute home for youths who have made a mistake." The atmosphere, far from being oppressive or regimented, feels more like one large family. Young men in shorts and t-shirts could be seen gathering around their teachers in classrooms, working on computers, learning to make fried bananas (which were delicious!), and shooting basketballs at a hoop. Smiles abounded, and the jovial laughter of adolescent boys filled the air.

The success of the program, according to Ms. Ticha na Nakorn, lies in one simple word: love. The young men are surrounded by love and are treated with dignity. They participate in creating their own rules and are rewarded for their successes. They are taught to understand their feelings and are given safe ways to



Residents paint at Ban Kanjanapisek.

express them. They learn to communicate openly and honestly and are encouraged to give constructive feedback to each other. In learning to trust one another, they learn to trust themselves and, in turn, to become trustworthy. Remarkably, Ban Kanjanapisek has a zero recidivism rate.

When asked what motivates and energizes her, Ms. Ticha na Nakorn answered simply, "I do what I do because they are human beings." In her presence, I had a renewed sense of the meaning of "extravagant welcome and radical inclusivity." At Ban Kanjanapisek, the Buddhist principal of compassion shines as brightly as the golden sheen of Thailand's oldest and most sacred Chedi.

Kathy Clark is an Associate Conference Minister for the Southeast Conference and the director of the TAP (Theology Among the People) Program.

Alabama-Tennessee Association Gathers for its Forty-first Annual Meeting

On the evening of Friday, April 21, delegates, visitors, and ministers of the Alabama-Tennessee Association gathered at Trinity Congregational United Church of Christ in Athens, Alabama. In their theme for the meeting, "On the Heels of Freedom—Celebrating the Legacy of the American Missionary Association in the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ," the gathering of more than 150 people looked back at the rich tradition of which our host church has been a part. They then looked forward as they acted to receive two congregations into the United Church of Christ during their business meeting on Saturday.

The meeting opened to the inspiring music of the Holy Trinity Community Church choir from Nashville, which brought the gathering to its feet with clapping and a chorus of "Amen's!" Susan Mitchell, co-pastor of Sankofa United Church of Christ in Atlanta and a partner in the Rekindle the Gift oral history and renewal ministry, called on us to rekindle the gifts of vision, hope, and grace by reaching out of our congregations into our communities to be agents of transformation, as were our forebears in faith. The evening ended with a time of fellowship over refreshments.

On Saturday morning the business meeting opened with introductions to the two congregations being recommended for membership in the United Church of Christ. Unity Worship Center in Montgomery, Alabama, whose organizing pastor is Bennie Liggins, is just over a year old and has a congregation of about 50 members. They worship in the auditorium of a mid-town planetarium. Holy Trinity Community



Above: Conference Minister Tim Downs installs officers and committee members for the Alabama-Tennessee Association.



Inset: Participants from Montgomery, AL, and Pleasant Hill, TN, chat at the Annual Meeting.

Church in Nashville, whose organizing pastor is Cynthia Andrews-Looper, is a congregation that is nine years old and has a membership of 140. Holy Trinity has moved into a building that the Southeast Conference is purchasing on their behalf. Both congregations were voted into membership unanimously.

Newly elected to office were Dorinda Broadnax, from Community Congregational UCC, Montgomery, as secretary; Dan Rosemergy, of Brookmeade Congregational UCC, Nashville, as chair of Christian Social Justice; and Tom Baird, of Church of the Savior, Knoxville, as chair of Church and Ministry. Ginny Nixon, a member of Pleasant Hill Community Church UCC, continues as moderator of the Association. The ministries of both the new and continuing officers were affirmed in a serv-

ice before the meeting adjourned.

In his address to the Association, Conference Minister Tim Downs noted that the Southeast Conference showed an increase in OCWM (Our Church's Wider Mission) Basic Support giving in 2005 of \$8,000 over 2004, and membership in the Conference continues to grow—signs of health. He thanked the Association for the great generosity they demonstrated, along with others in the Conference, to generate more than \$30,000 for hurricane relief in 2005. He noted that we are on the cusp of major changes in the life of the Conference as we prepare to bid farewell to two of our staff, Joyce Hollyday and Betsy Flory, with deep thanks for their excellent ministries, and as we anticipate new initiatives over the next few months.

Georgia-South Carolina Association Meets for an Ecclesiastical Council

On Saturday, April 29, the Georgia-South Carolina Association met at Pilgrimage UCC in Marietta, Georgia, for an Ecclesiastical Council, at which they recommended three candidates for ordination and received a congregation into the United Church of Christ. About 100 people gathered to listen to Lisa Stewart of Virginia-Highland Church (A Baptist and UCC Congregation) in Atlanta; Sarah Kim, a member of Church of the Savior, Roswell, GA, and co-pastor of Salim United Church of



The choir of Garden of Grace United Church from Columbia, SC, opened the worship service after being enthusiastically received into the United Church of Christ.

Christ; and Cameron Trimble, a member of Pilgrimage UCC and on the staffs of Central Congregational UCC, Atlanta, and the Southeast Conference. Each of the candidates delivered engaging and excellent sermons and responded to questions and comments concerning their sermons and ordination papers. And each was unanimously recommended for ordination.

Following this, members of Garden of Grace United Church in Columbia, SC, presented themselves to be received into the United Church of Christ. A rapidly growing congregation of about 100 members, led by Andy Sidden and formerly affiliated with the Metropolitan Community Church, Garden of Grace has just completed their first building and

moved in. They are eager to be a justice-oriented, multi-racial, multi-cultural, open and affirming congregation serving the entire greater Columbia area. They were received enthusiastically.

The gathering adjourned to a barbecue lunch, followed by worship led by the new associate minister of Pilgrimage UCC, Kristin Vaughn. The choir of Garden of Grace provided the music for the service. They opened with an anthem to the tune of "New York, New York," celebrating their entry into the United Church of Christ, which brought the crowd to its feet in applause. This was followed by a workshop, led by Paula Long, on how we can pursue the Stillspeaking Initiative in the Southeast Conference.

*Far More Than We Can
Ask or Imagine...*
Southeast Conference
United Church of Christ



Conference Constitution and Bylaws Being Revised

By Ginny Nixon

The Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference will be asked to provisionally implement a new Constitution and Bylaws for the Southeast Conference of the UCC. The Bylaws Committee and the Board of Directors have looked at how the Conference has functioned during a period of exciting new programs and vigorous growth. We realized we need a new, flexible structure to empower our evolving "UCC Style."

It is, in fact, our polity—our style of autonomy combined with covenantal relationships of mutual accountability—that sets the UCC apart from other denominations. These covenantal relationships are highly interactive—free, open, responsive, and responsible. The Constitution and Bylaws are the documents of a covenant within the covenant of grace, and they delineate, but do not regulate, the covenantal relationships we have between and among the various expressions of the UCC.

The Conference plays a key role in our UCC polity as the body best able to call forth mutual accountability and responsibility. It is a link between the local congregations and the national expression of the church, and it is also the location of the mission work that is too large for the local congregations to undertake alone. The Bylaws Committee embraced a mission to try to develop documents outlining a functional and effective organization to carry out these covenantal responsibilities.

Much of the new Constitution and Bylaws are like the old Constitution of the Conference: a membership of local churches and those individuals with authorized ministerial standing, an Annual Meeting, officers, a Board of Directors, and many other provisions. But a significant addition is a Preamble that places all the organization within the frame of a church headed by "Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior." The Preamble specifically affirms the church's foundational faith resources and the church's responsibility "to make this faith its own".

The structure to carry out the mission of the Conference also has some major changes. The committee recognizes that "one size does NOT fit all" the types of ministry carried out in the Conference. Different types of groups are proposed to work in different ministries. Task Forces can be assigned to specific projects; Advisory Committees will work with staff on ministries led by staff (such as TAP

and New Church Development); Standing Committees will deal with ongoing organizational concerns (Stewardship and Finance, Personnel, and Nominations).

The most significant structural change being proposed is the creation of Ministry Teams that will be responsible for tying together the work of the national, Conference, Association, and local expressions of the UCC as we work in covenant to respond to our many calls to ministry. We already nominate (and General Synod elects) representatives from the Southeast Conference to the boards of the covenanted ministries (the Executive Council, Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, Justice and Witness Ministries, and General Ministries). In the past, we have lacked an easy means of utilizing the information and experience of all these representatives. Now they will sit on our Board of Directors and be joined by a team partner elected by our Annual Meeting to work with the national board representative. These Ministry Teams will determine how best to link local, Association, Conference, and national efforts to "more effectively accomplish [our] tasks and the work of the United Church of Christ." (from the Preamble of the UCC Bylaws).

The Bylaws Committee and the Board of Directors recognize that some of the changes are significant and that organizational change does not happen overnight. Therefore we are recommending that this new Constitution and Bylaws be implemented provisionally at the 2006 Annual Meeting. This means that the Conference will operate as if the new documents were in effect, but the old Constitution is not repealed. Therefore, if problems develop, the previous structure is still an available resource and revisions can be made to the new one.

Copies of the proposed Constitution and Bylaws are available online at www.secucc.org. A hearing will be held at our Annual Meeting in June, to which everyone is encouraged to come to learn more and ask questions. We have been living with an increasingly outdated Constitution for many years. The Bylaws Committee is excited about presenting this document, which we feel will provide the flexibility and structure necessary to carry out our mission.

Ginny Nixon chairs the Bylaws Committee and is a member of Pleasant Hill Community Church UCC in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

- The Youth Ministries Task Force reported that they have been surveying the program needs of the congregations of the Conference. They will prepare a complete report and recommendations in the fall.
- The Vision Statement Task Force is continuing with its work, and will have a recommendation following the Annual Meeting of the Conference.
- A recommendation to enter a feasibility study about a capital campaign for the Conference was approved. The study will be announced at the Annual Meeting of the Conference
- The Bylaws Committee shared its latest draft of the Conference bylaws. The Board voted to recommend them to the Annual Meeting for provisional approval for one year and, following revisions during that year, for final approval in 2007.

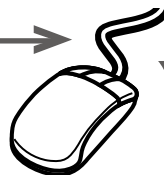


Standing at the front in Amistad Chapel at the UCC Church House in Cleveland are Tara McCrary of Central Congregational UCC in Atlanta, Gerri Ryons-Hudson of the Southeast Conference staff, and Bette Graves Thomas of First Congregational UCC in Atlanta, who were present for the nineteenth Annual Meeting of the United Church of Christ Support Staff Network. Also representing the Southeast Conference at the meeting, whose theme was "Many Paths, Same Goal" were Aundrea Crum from Unity Worship Center in Montgomery, AL, and Jennifer Young from Pleasant Hill Community Church, Pleasant Hill, TN.



In February, four members of Pleasant Hill Community Church UCC visited Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro, they rode up a mountain by train to view the famous Christ the Redeemer statue, with arms outstretched as if blessing the *oikoumene*—the Greek word for "the whole inhabited world," from which we get the word *ecumenical*. They dropped in on the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Porto Alegre, where they experienced rich worship in a huge tent, attended a forum on the Middle East conflict, and visited displays by indigenous peoples from around the world. The WCC's emphases on Mission, Life and Work, and Faith and Order were evident at the meeting, where more than 3,000 Christians gathered under the ambitious and prayerful theme, "God, in Your Grace, Transform the World." Challenges and calls to action from the assembly include the quest for Christian unity; a recommitment to the Decade to Overcome Violence (2001-2010); discernment of prophetic and programmatic means to achieve global economic justice; and engagement in inter-religious dialogue. The four Tennessee travelers were delighted to encounter UCC General Minister and President John Thomas, who was part of a delegation of 40 people representing the UCC at the assembly. Pictured above (from left to right) are Jean Clark, Betty Streich, John Thomas, Don Clark, and Mardelle Bourdon.

**Visit our website at
www.secucc.org**



CHANGE TAKES COURAGE

TAP Program Inspires Theological Thinking

By Kathy Clark

All Christians are theologians. That's the opening line of *How to Think Theologically*, by Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, one of the texts that participants in the first course of the Theology Among the People (TAP) program read and discuss. The authors go on to state: "It's not that they were born that way or decided one day to go into theology. It's a simple fact of Christian life: their faith makes them theologians, whether they know it or not, and it calls them to become the best theologians they can be."

In the TAP program, participants and facilitators together practice the art of theological reflection, naming and thinking critically about the assumptions that underlie their faith. They do this in light of both their understanding of sacred Scripture and the experiences of their lives, individually and corporately. This practice often leads to change, especially if participants recognize a discrepancy between what they say they believe and how they actually live their lives. Theological reflection in the context of an intentional learning and faith-sharing community is the heart of the TAP program.

Engaging in this process takes courage, because change takes courage. Authors Stone and Duke refer to the process of change that occurs when thinking theologically as the movement from "imbedded theology" to "deliberative theology." Imbedded theology refers to the system of beliefs and practices we inherit from our families, our culture, and our original communities of faith. Deliberative theology takes place when we make those beliefs our own, or when we construct a new set of beliefs that is more consistent with our unfolding understanding of God's will and Word at work in the world. Needless to say, this is not always a simple or pain-free process.

Who among us as believers has not felt our beliefs shaken by unexpected circumstances or by the simple process of maturation? It is natural to question and change the way we think and act about those most fundamental foundations of our lives, as our lives change and our experiences broaden. Ethicist James Fowler refers to this as the natural process of "faith



TAP Director Kathy Clark (front right), Conference Minister Tim Downs (front left), and UCC General Minister and President John Thomas (back left) stand with the first TAP graduating class, at their commencement in June 2003 at Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Chattanooga.

development." This process may be natural, but that does not mean it is easy.

In the first course of the TAP program, participants study the Psalms, the prayer book (some say hymnal) of the ancient Israelites and of the church. The Book of Psalms is chosen as the scriptural touchstone for this course because, as Don Saliers, Professor of Theology and Worship at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, says, "Theology begins and ends in prayer." And so should theological reflection. According to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, author of *The Message of the Psalms*, the Psalms prayerfully articulate this reality of change that the Hebrew people knew and understood. In address to God, they captured for all of us the movement from orientation, to disorientation, to new orientation. In addition to providing a framework for understanding the Psalms, Brueggemann has provided a metaphor for understanding the change Christians experience when re-negotiating or finding new ways to understand and articulate their faith.

Orientation, disorientation, and new orientation are part of the process that all who engage in theological reflection experience. This is part of what makes the TAP program such an enlivening and enriching experience for participants, who negotiate (sometimes struggle) their way through this process, with the encouragement and support of the fellow members of their group. Finding one's way from orientation, through disorientation, and into new orientation is what theology is all about. This journey is fundamentally an act of faith and hope, mirrored in the example of Jesus the Christ who, as God Incarnate, lived, died, rose from the dead, and promised to come again.

Our faith makes us theologians and, as Stone and Duke remind us, we are called to become the best theologians we can be. TAP is one way that the Southeast Conference seeks to honor that call and to equip lay men and women in this process.

Kathy Clark is an Associate Conference Minister for the Southeast Conference and Director of the TAP Program.

Concerns and Celebrations

Congratulations to **Circular Congregational UCC, Charleston, SC**, the oldest church of the Congregational tradition in the South, which is celebrating its 325th anniversary this year! Pastor **Bert Keller** was featured in *Charleston Magazine*, described as "a progressive Christian leading Charleston's oldest congregation; a gentle, quiet contemplative soul who's more than willing to ruffle some feathers." **Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Chattanooga**, celebrated the 100th birthday of Pastor Emeritus **Arnold Slater**, and honored **John Mingus** as he retires, for his eleven years of outstanding service at the church.

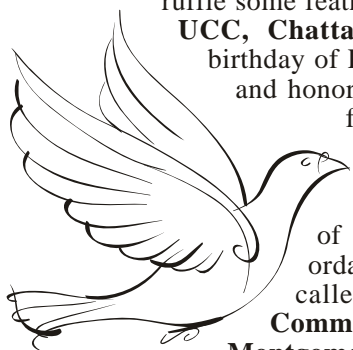
Terry McCreary, a graduate of Candler School of Theology ordained in the AME tradition, was called to serve as pastor of **Community Congregational UCC, Montgomery, AL**. **Reginald Holloway**, ordained at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL, has accepted a call to serve as

pastor of **First Congregational UCC, Talladega, AL**. **Kathi Martin**, founding pastor of GSN Ministries, has accepted a call as an associate staff minister at First Metropolitan Community Church of Atlanta. **Laurie Robins** of Central Congregational UCC, Atlanta, serving as a CPE resident at North Atlanta Tri-Hospitals, has been granted ecclesiastical endorsement. **Kate Stulce** of Pilgrim Congregational UCC, Chattanooga has been granted status as a commissioned minister in the UCC. **Angie Wright**, pastor of **Beloved Community UCC, Birmingham, AL**, is serving as Disaster Assistance Coordinator for the Long Term Recovery Committee in Central Alabama, which is working with 5,000 evacuees from areas hit by the hurricanes who will remain in Birmingham, and 20,000 in Alabama.

Central Congregational UCC, Atlanta, organized a group to go to Washington, DC, to participate in an action to stop genocide in Darfur and a work crew to go to Louisiana to assist in repairs for homes damaged by the hurricanes. **Pilgrim**

Congregational UCC, Birmingham, AL, will host a gathering of "More Light" congregations of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the open and affirming churches of that denomination. **Pleasant Hill Community Church, UCC, Pleasant Hill, TN**, was awarded the Congregational Stewardship Award from CHHSM (The Council for Health and Human Services of the UCC), for providing significant financial and volunteer support to Uplands retirement village. We rejoice that **Lanett Congregational Christian Church UCC, Lanett, AL**, voted by a margin of 70% to 30% to remain affiliated with the United Church of Christ.

The **Southeast Conference** has received a grant in the amount of \$200,000 from Local Church Ministries of the UCC for two years of the Nehemiah Initiative, an innovative effort to establish new churches and train leadership for both new and renewing congregations. **Sankofa UCC** in Atlanta has received a \$30,000 grant from our partner in new church development, Trinity UCC, Chicago.





In Praise of Teenagers. . . and the Adults Who Minister with Them

Earlier this year, a Southern Conference congregation decided to take a vote about whether or not to remain in the United Church of Christ in light of last summer’s General Synod resolution regarding same-sex marriage. Debate was reportedly heated and the church deeply divided—until the youth group weighed in. One by one the teens stood up. The well-behaved, properly dressed ones, the tattooed and slouchy ones, the class clown and the painfully self-conscious ones each took their turn speaking.

They told their church that they had been raised on the notion that God loves justice and that Jesus practiced radical hospitality. They told their elders that they had believed them when they said that God loves everybody and that being Christian is more than being nice, but means practicing a way of life that would bring the kingdom of heaven near. The teenagers—very possibly the same ones who draped yards with toilet paper at Homecoming and turned crickets loose in the biology lab at school—told their elders that if they left the UCC, the youth group would leave the church and find a congregation that actually meant what they preached. They believed in the God they had been raised on and wanted to live the way they had been taught.

I have this account from the youth group leaders who sat—surprised, breathless, proud, and word-

less—in the rear of the sanctuary as the scene unfolded. As I understand it, the teens pretty much ended the debate that night. The adults felt called to account and the congregation remains in the United Church of Christ. To my way of thinking, this is the reason we do youth ministry.

Our young people are set in our midst to keep us accountable to the gaps between what we say and what we do. Like the cheeky teenager David when he chastised the Israelite armies cowed by the fierce Goliath, the Southern Conference youth group had listened to what they had been taught and expected their elders to live it as if they believed it. Paul, too, tells the youngster Timothy that he has to preach to his elders whether he or they like it or not, because this is the only way to honor the gifts given Timothy. In fact, elsewhere Paul reminds Timothy that it is his job, as a young person, to rekindle the gift passed on to him from his mother and grandmother, keeping the flame alive for those who have yet to receive it.

I have been told more than once that youth ministry isn’t real discipling or leadership development, but at best only a prelude to it. But neither the Bible, nor likely the Southern Conference congregation, would agree with this assessment. Gifts for faithful living and leadership are as unruly and unpredictable as the

average 13-year-old. Leadership does not wait to blossom until we reach an age of staid maturity. We cannot afford for it to flower more and more outside the church.

So we are blessed when there are people and congregations who see and nurture these gifts from God. It has been my very great honor to work with many fine young people and many amazing, committed, and talented adults who understand how crucial our youth are to the viability of the church, committing time energy and great love to ministering with our youngest disciples and leaders. As my time with Conference youth ministry ends, I salute these people of great faith. It has been an immeasurable blessing to serve with them, a blessing that will continue to unfold as I seek my next call. Peace to you all.



By
BETSY
TAYLOR
FLORY

Betsy Taylor Flory leaves her position as Director of Youth Ministry for the Southeast Conference this month. We give thanks for her dedicated commitment to young people and the inspired creativity she has brought to this very important work.

2005 OCWM CONTRIBUTIONS

CHURCH NAME & LOCATION	AMOUNT	CHURCH NAME & LOCATION	AMOUNT
King’s Chapel, Alpine, AL	0	Pilgrimage, Marietta, GA	15,200.00
Trinity Congregational, Athens, AL	350.00	Midway Congregational, Midway, GA	3,385.00
Beloved Community, Birmingham, AL	7,832.50	Oak Grove Congregational Christian, Pine Mountain, GA	1,500.00
First Congregational, Birmingham, AL	7,990.00	Church of the Savior, Roswell, GA	650.00
Pilgrim Congregational, Birmingham, AL	10,000.00	First Congregational, Savannah, GA	2,200.00
Liberty Congregational Christian, Brantley, AL	750.00	Victory, Stone Mountain, GA	10,000.00
New Hope Congregational Christian, Clio, AL	0	Bethany Congregational, Thomasville, GA	1,360.00
The United Church of Huntsville, Huntsville, AL	2,968.00	Jones Chapel Congregational Christian, Woodbury, GA	3,485.42
Congregational Christian, Lanett, AL	3,022.25	Union, Tougaloo, MS	0
First Congregational, Marion, AL	100.00	Circular Congregational, Charleston, SC	15,000.00
Community Congregational, Montgomery, AL	0	Plymouth Congregational, Charleston, SC	0
First Congregational, Montgomery, AL	500.00	First, Belvidere, TN	5,865.00
Antioch Congregational Christian, Roanoke, AL	0	Pilgrim Congregational, Chattanooga, TN	12,150.00
First Congregational, Talladega, AL	0	United Church of Cookeville, Cookeville, TN	2,797.00
*Center Congregational, Atlanta, GA	0	Grace, Crossville, TN	6,600.00
Central Congregational, Atlanta, GA	31,350.00	Deer Lodge Congregational, Deer Lodge, TN	2,180.00
First Congregational, Atlanta, GA	19,000.00	Fairfield Glade Community, Fairfield Glade, TN	6,400.00
*God, Self and Neighbor, Atlanta, GA	0	Church of the Savior, Knoxville, TN	3,300.00
*Good Shepherd Community, Atlanta, GA	0	Brookmeade Congregational, Nashville, TN	1,700.00
Open Community, Atlanta, GA	1,200.00	First United, Nashville, TN	1,295.01
Rush Memorial Congregational, Atlanta, GA	0	Howard Congregational, Nashville, TN	880.00
Sankofa United Church of Christ, Atlanta, GA	700.00	Pleasant Hill Community, Pleasant Hill, TN	27,999.96
Virginia Highland, Atlanta, GA	0	First, Sweetwater, TN	1,800.00
Evergreen Congregational, Beachton, GA	1,030.00		
*Duncans Creek Church, Buford, GA	0		
United Congregational Christian, Columbus, GA	0		
Methodist-Congregational Federated, Demorest, GA	370.00		

* Indicates churches that have left the Southeast Conference in or since 2005

Southeast Feast

Food for the Heart and Soul



A Fond Farewell

In late April, I was making the long drive back to western North Carolina after spending a weekend in Birmingham, Alabama. I had been invited there to tell stories of racial reconciliation at the annual gathering of the Alliance of Baptists. The drive gave me lots of time to ponder the thought that, in whatever context I find myself—whether preaching, teaching, writing, or leading retreats—the role of “storyteller” seems to fit my heart best. As the mountains of home came into view sometime after midnight, I felt a wave of excitement overtake me, knowing that I’ll be able to live into that calling in some new ways in the months and years ahead.

I’ve received a grant to write a book based on my time observing the Truth and Reconciliation processes in South Africa and Greensboro, North Carolina. I’m also helping Anne Welsh, whose

husband Norman Morrison set himself on fire at the Pentagon in 1965 to protest the Vietnam War, to write her story—a stunning spiritual journey of forgiveness, transformation, and peacemaking. And still dancing in the recesses of my heart is a dream of writing a novel someday.

Circle of Mercy, the small congregation I co-founded four years ago, is expanding and deepening in marvelous ways—with a growing connection to a maximum-security prison, leadership in Asheville’s new anti-racism group, and a partnership with a church in Cuba, among other ministry endeavors. I continue to chair and serve on the faculty of Word and World, an itinerant school for faith-based activists, and to be thankful for opportunities such as my journey in early April to the desert to commemorate 25 years of Lenten protests at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site. I think I’ll have no trouble staying busy.

But my choice to leave after nine years of work with the Southeast Conference does not come without regrets. A decade ago, when I began to doubt my calling to ordained ministry, people steered me toward the United Church of Christ, and a position opened up with the Southeast Conference; and I will be forever grateful. I have enjoyed and will miss this work and all of you who have supported and guided me. I take comfort in the fact that on a warm, breezy night on a veranda in Chiang Mai, Thailand—while eating spicy curry, sipping mulberry wine, and keeping one eye on the geckos skittering across the ceiling—I looked around at my work colleagues and realized that these are friendships that will last.

The other images that are most clearly etched in my memory from the Thailand trip are from our visit to the Lampang Elephant Reserve. Of course seeing my colleagues perched on huge, lumbering elephants is unforgettable. So is seeing elephant dung turned into paper. If there’s one thing Thailand has a lot of, it’s elephant dung. And seeing it boiled, dyed, spread on racks, and dried in the sun is...well, just not something you see every day. Our American cliché about making

lemonade when life hands us lemons has a Thai counterpart: When life hands you elephant dung, make elephant dung paper. (I must say, it was a big hit with the kids at Circle of Mercy when I showed them a photograph of me atop an elephant, framed in 100 percent elephant dung paper.)

The Lampang Reserve has an elephant hospital. One of its most renowned patients stepped on a land mine near Thailand’s border with Myanmar/Burma. Doctors at the hospital crafted a prosthetic foot for the elephant. I try to remember that when I worry that life might hand me some difficult challenges. Could anything I have to face be more challenging than driving a huge, scared, wounded, three-footed elephant many miles through a jungle to the hospital? (And by driving, I don’t mean in a vehicle—in Thailand, elephants *are* vehicles).

After that late-April weekend with the Alliance of Baptists in Birmingham, I finally pulled into my driveway about two o’clock in the morning. Two hours later, I awoke abruptly when my two dogs started barking wildly. I went out on my upper deck and came face to face with a black bear in a tree—near enough for me to hear its breathing. A closer look revealed two cubs in the high branches and a larger bear at the base. I was in awe.

Four days later, I was part of an interfaith panel on Spirituality and Mental Health at our local hospital, along with a Jewish rabbi, a Sufi Muslim, a Lumbee Native American elder, and a practitioner of Appalachian folk religion (whose family has lived in these mountains for five generations). At lunch, I shared about my encounter with the bears. The Native American woman asked if I understood the significance of bears. In her tradition, they’re the only animals that cannot be summoned; they show up when they have a message. The Appalachian woman asked if I knew how rare it is to see four of them together. “We consider bears messengers as well. And the number four is the number of completion.”

Life never fails to startle me. I had never met either of these women before. They had no idea about my job change, or my occasional bouts of mild anxiety that week about letting go of a “regular job,” a dependable salary, and health benefits. In the grand scheme of the mysteries in the world, I take the bears’ appearance as reassurance that this “completion” is right; that all shall be well.

In Birmingham, I had showed up in a park for a Saturday evening peace vigil. I scanned the small crowd and saw Nancy and Dick Sales holding anti-war signs. It wasn’t quite as startling as seeing bears in a tree in the middle of the night, but it was a pleasant surprise. Angie Wright appeared the next day at a breakfast gathering to share with the Alliance of Baptists about her experience of pastoring a multiracial church. Serendipitous encounters of grace.

I expect them to continue. Sometimes, when we least expect it, we reappear in one another’s lives. In the meantime, I will carry you all in my prayers, with gratitude for the many joys of our nine-year journey together. As I move on, I give thanks that I am able, as my dear, late friend Milton Hurst did so faithfully, to respond to every “How are you?” with “I’m blessed.”



Elephants and their caregivers at Lampang Reserve.

CONFERENCE CALENDAR

JUNE 1

East Alabama-West Georgia
Executive Committee Meeting
Oak Grove Christian UCC, Pine
Mountain, GA

JUNE 4

Service of Ordination for Cameron
Trimble
Central Congregational UCC,
Atlanta, GA

JUNE 7

Revival for Sankofa UCC featur-
ing Jeremiah Wright
Rush Memorial UCC, Atlanta, GA

JUNE 8

TAP Advisory Committee Meeting
& Commencement
First Congregational Christian
UCC, Birmingham, AL

JUNE 9-10

Southeast Conference Annual
Meeting
First Congregational Christian
UCC, Birmingham, AL

JUNE 19

Partnership Meeting with Alliance
of Baptists/ Disciples/UCC
Glendale Baptist Church,
Nashville, TN

JUNE 22-25

Regional Youth Event
Elon University, Elon, NC

JUNE 23-24

Leadership 101 for UCC Pastors
& Lay Leaders with Steve
Gifford
Conference Office, Atlanta, GA

JULY 10

Formula of Agreement Partners
Atlanta Area Judicatory Staff
Meeting
Hosted by Southeastern Synod,
ELCA, Atlanta, GA

JULY 14-15

Church and Ministry Committee
Training Event
Conference Office, Atlanta, GA

JULY 18

Georgia-South Carolina
Association Executive
Committee Meeting
Pilgrimage UCC, Marietta, GA

JULY 20-23

Council of Conference Ministers’
Retreat
Epworth-by-the-Sea, St. Simon’s
Island, GA

JULY 27-29

UCC History and Polity Class
Candler School of Theology,
Atlanta, GA